



# LEWIS & CLARK CITY-COUNTY Health Department

1930 Ninth Avenue  
Helena, MT 59601  
PH: 406.4HEALTH or 406.443.2584  
Fax: 406.457.8990

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Contact: Melanie Reynolds, Health Officer, 406-443-2584

Gayle Shirley, Communications Coordinator, 406-457-8908

## **Prescription Painkillers: Killing More than Pain**

Some call it the invisible epidemic: tens of thousands of people are dying in this country each year from drug overdoses.

But we're not talking here about illicit drugs, like cocaine, heroin, and meth. We're talking about legitimate drugs prescribed by doctors to manage the symptoms of legitimate medical conditions.

In the past decade, prescription drug overdose has emerged as a serious national public health problem. In 2010, about 12 million Americans reported abusing prescription drugs. Some took more than the prescribed dose. Some used the drugs to treat conditions other than the ones they were prescribed for. In an alarming number of cases, especially among teens, people took them for nonmedical reasons, in an effort to get "high."

Prescription painkillers, like Vicodin, OxyContin, and methadone, are the most commonly abused.

### **Cost in Lives and Dollars**

The result of this emerging threat has been a sobering toll in lives. In 2008, almost 15,000 people died of prescription painkiller overdoses in the United States, almost four times the number in 1999. We now see more deaths caused by prescription overdoses than by car crashes in this country. Prescription overdoses outnumber overdoses of heroin and cocaine combined.

The cost in dollars is shocking, too. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), nonmedical use of prescription painkillers costs insurance companies (and ultimately all of us) as much as \$72.5 billion a year in health-care costs.

### **Epidemic Strikes Home**

Unfortunately, Montana is not immune. In fact, we are one of 27 states whose overdose death rate exceeds the national rate (5.3 deaths per 100,000 people compared to 4.8). The CDC reports that people in rural counties are about twice as likely to overdose on prescription painkillers as people in big cities.

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State and local statistics clearly show that the invisible epidemic strikes close to home:

- In 2010 an estimated 2.6% of Montanans reported using a painkiller that wasn't prescribed to them.
- Prescription drugs contribute to about 300 Montana deaths a year.
- Montana is third in the nation per capita for teens abusing prescription drugs.
- A survey of Montana high school students conducted early this year found that 18.4 percent had taken a prescription drug without a doctor's prescription.
- The same survey in Lewis and Clark County revealed that 20.8 percent of local high school students are abusing prescription drugs. An alarming 9.6 percent of middle school students confess to having done so, too.

## **Fueling the Epidemic**

Public health officials believe at least three factors are fueling the increase in abuse of prescription drugs.

First, the supply is larger than ever. Sales of prescription painkillers are four times what they were in 1999, and these drugs are usually cheaper and easier to get than illicit drugs. More than half of prescription drug abusers get them free from friends and relatives.

Second, with the increased prescription of these drugs, many people have leftover medications that may be misused if they're not disposed of promptly and properly.

And finally, many of these drugs are addictive, which can lead to stealing, dealing on the street, or "doctor shopping" to get more.

## **Step in the Right Direction**

Deaths from prescription drug overdoses are preventable deaths. Given the mission of public health to protect and improve the health of our communities, we have a responsibility to combat this fledgling epidemic. At the same time, we need to strike a balance with safeguarding the legitimate use of these drugs to treat pain and other medical symptoms.

The Montana Legislature took a step in the right direction this year when, after two previous failed attempts, it passed a bill to establish a statewide prescription-drug monitoring program. The Montana Board of Pharmacy will supervise the program, which is expected to be up and running in the first few months of 2012.

The monitoring program will involve creation of a confidential electronic registry that doctors and pharmacists can use to access patient records. It will enable them to spot "doctor shoppers" and make appropriate decisions about prescribing painkillers.

## **What You Can Do**

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While the prescription drug registry is a big step in the right direction, there are simpler steps we can all take to help curb the invisible epidemic:

- **Go through your medicine cabinet and get rid of all prescription drugs you no longer need.** You can safely dispose of them at a new drop-off box installed this month at the Law Enforcement Center, 221 Breckenridge.
- **Use prescription drugs only as prescribed.** Never assume that more is better. Some painkillers are long-acting and can stay in your system for many hours. Follow your doctor's instructions to avoid overdosing.
- **Keep all prescription drugs in a safe location,** out of the sight and reach of children.
- **Never ask for or accept prescription drugs from friends or family.** Just because a specific drug worked for them doesn't mean it's appropriate for you. Your medical history is unique to you.
- **Never give or sell prescription drugs to others.**
- **Monitor the quantities of prescription drugs in your home.** This can alert you if someone is taking them for nonmedical use.
- **Talk to your children about prescription drugs as well as illicit drugs.** Make sure they understand that medicine used the right way can heal; medicine used the wrong way can kill.

For more information, visit:

- Montana Attorney General's "Invisible Epidemic" website: [www.invisibleepidemic.org](http://www.invisibleepidemic.org)
- 2010 National Survey on Drug Use and Health:  
<http://oas.samhsa.gov/NSDUH/2k10NSDUH/2k10Results.htm>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: [www.cdc.gov/VitalSigns/PainkillerOverdoses/](http://www.cdc.gov/VitalSigns/PainkillerOverdoses/)

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